

*Songs, Music Videos and Interviews: Precious Tools for Teaching Authentic Culture in Italian
Language Courses*

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In my beginner and intermediate level Italian courses at Dickinson College, I regularly use music and interviews as ways to connect with students and teach them Italian culture in a fun and captivating way. In my presentation, I will share how I use music and interviews in my courses, and I will give practical suggestions on how to take advantage of songs, music videos and interviews to make Italian classes more interesting and fun, for both the students and the instructors. I will begin with the use of music in my classes, and then I will move on to speak about how I use interviews.

Most undergraduates love music and, of course, so do students of Italian. My students come to class, walk on campus and exercise while listening to music. They even study with music in the background! Since music accompanies young people throughout their day, I have strived to make it an essential part of my classes. Italian music is unknown to almost all American students, therefore I have made it a priority to introduce them to Italian music and, in time, I have found several ways to incorporate music into my lessons. I use it as entertainment, as a tool to review grammar structures and vocabulary, and of course as a way to teach Italian culture.

As Fabio Caon explains, music has great potential for language learning because:

- Facilita l'attivazione di una motivazione basata sul piacere;
- Può favorire lo sviluppo in classe di dinamiche sociali positive, legate alla condivisione di interessi, di conoscenze, di passioni;

- Presenta evidenti aspetti di ludicità, utili per l'apprendimento significativo (from “Uso della canzone”, in *Sillabo di riferimento per la formazione degli insegnanti di italiano a stranieri*, by Serragiotto, pp. 102-103, 2009).

Songs can be used to review grammar. As long as an instructor is familiar with the lyrics of Italian songs, it is easy to find songs for any grammar topic.

For example, when I teach a new verb tense, I often use songs, because they are very helpful in making a class dedicated to grammar more fun. If I recently introduced a new verb tense, I give students the lyrics of a song and ask them to underline all the verbs in a specific verb tense, while I am playing the song in the background. For example, when I teach the *presente indicativo* I use the song *Se tu non sei con me* by Syria. [SLIDE].

A few examples of songs that can be used with different verb tenses are:

La vasca by Alex Britti, for reflexive verbs in the *presente indicativo*.

In bianco e nero by Carmen Consoli, for the *imperfetto*.

Ascolta il tuo cuore by Laura Pausini, for the *imperativo*.

At the end of a course, when we are reviewing all the course content, I use songs that present various verb tenses and modes that we have learned, and the students' task is to recognize the different tenses and modes. In this case, I do not provide the students with the lyrics of the song. Instead, I play the song on youtube, choosing the option with lyrics. I tell my students to make a chart on their notebook with various categories, one for each verb tense, and I ask students to write down all the verbs that they see and hear for each category. One of my favorite songs for this kind of activity is *Vieni a vedere perché* by Cesare Cremonini, which features verbs in the *presente indicativo*, *futuro*, *imperativo*, *infinito* and *congiuntivo presente*. [2 SLIDES]

When I teach the hypotheticals of possibility, I like to use *Una canzone d'amore* by 883. I give students the lyrics of the song, but the verbs in the *congiuntivo imperfetto* and *condizionale* are not conjugated [SLIDE]. While the students are listening to the song, they have to conjugate the verbs. Then, we sing the song together. This is one of my students' all time favorite songs to sing; they particularly enjoy the part where Pezzali sings: "Solo per te, solo per te!". When we do this activity, there are always students who leave the classroom humming that verse of the song!

A great website where teachers can find suggestions on how to teach Italian through music is www.adgblog.it (Accademia del Giglio). On that website, songs are divided into 3 categories, A, B and C, which follow the levels of learning established by the European Framework of Reference for Languages. In addition to providing a very comprehensive database, the website explains what aspects a teacher can work on with each song (like prepositions, or a verb tense) and there are also exercises already prepared that can be used with the songs. It really is a great tool for teachers!

A couple of years ago I also began to use music just like students use it, for the sheer pleasure of listening to it. And since tv channels like MTV and websites like youtube are so popular among young people, I added a visual component as well. Therefore, every day, a few minutes before class begins, I show the video of an Italian song. With no introduction, no comprehension exercises, and no final questions. The idea came to me because I teach my three courses one after the other, and I always have 10 minutes between the end of one class and the beginning of the next one. In the past, a lot of students used to enter the classroom and stare at the wall or play with their iphone while waiting for the class to begin. They rarely chatted and there was often an awkward silence, unless I asked them questions and started a conversation. Now instead my students are not only welcomed by my "Buongiorno", but also by an Italian music video.

Sometimes it seems that students are not paying attention to the song that I am playing, but then they often make comments that make me realize that they are actually listening and watching.

For example, I was told by some of my students that they have become fans of Negramaro and Fabri Fibra after watching some of their videos in my class. And once, a student who worked as a DJ for Dickinson radio station played *Dedicato a te* by Le Vibrazioni on his radio show, after listening to it in my class, and he publicly thanked me for introducing him to Italian music.

Whenever possible, I like to choose a song whose title is somehow related to what we have been learning in class. For example, when we do greetings, I play *Ciao e arrivederci* by Grignani.

When I teach the verb piacere, I play the video of *Mi piace*, by Barsotti. When I teach the imperative with pronouns, I play *Baciarmi ancora* by Jovanotti. And so on. I think that students feel more connected to a song when they can understand at least the title.

Last but not least, music is also a great tool to teach Italian culture. The lyrics of a song can be useful to introduce or to reinforce a topic that was discussed in class. For example, when I talk to my students about soccer, I usually play *La partita di Pallone* by Rita Pavone and *Una vita da mediano* by Ligabue. Or when I explain how the Italian university system works, I play the video of Simone Cristicchi's song *Studentessa Universitaria*, which talks about the life of an Italian student who is studying "fuori sede", away from home. These songs and videos can be a fun starting point to many interesting discussions with the students, about cultural differences and similarities between the United States and Italy.

Finally, another fun way to use music is to sing *Tanti auguri* to students for their birthdays. On youtube there are several karaoke versions of the song and when it is a student's birthday, their friends always tell me: Professore, oggi è il compleanno di tal dei tali!" and we all sing. It is a lot of fun!

In conclusion, music is constantly present in my Italian courses where songs serve many different purposes. I find music a very powerful tool to establish and strengthen my relationship with my students, and to make my Italian classes more interesting and fun.

Video interviews are another tool that I use in my classes, to teach authentic Italian culture.

Dickinson College is located in a small town in Central Pennsylvania, where there are not that many Italians. Therefore, it is not easy to find speakers or special guests who can come to my classes. And yet two years ago I was able to invite an Italian pizzaiolo who works in a restaurant located by the campus, to speak to my students. I was talking to my students about immigration and so I thought that they would enjoy listening to the pizzaiolo's immigrant story.

Unfortunately, on the day that he was supposed to speak to my students, the pizzaiolo never showed up. When I called him to find out what happened, he simply told me that he was busy at work and couldn't make it. I felt very bad for the students, who had worked hard to prepare several questions for him and were very excited for the event. Since I am not someone who gives up easily, I decided that if the pizzaiolo was not coming to Dickinson, then I would go to the restaurant and interview the pizzaiolo there. I recorded the interview with a flip camera and the next day I showed the video in class. This is how I organized the activity: first I played the interview, then I gave the students a sheet with the questions, which we read together [SLIDE].

Then I played the video interview again and asked the students to write down the pizzaiolo's answers. Finally, I asked the students to tell me the various answers and if nobody had understood the answer, I explained to them what the pizzaiolo had said and then I re-played that part of the video. The activity proved very successful and I was proud to see that my students had understood most of the interview. Depending on the level of the students and the difficulty of the interview, sometimes I give students multiple choice answers, to simplify the activity.

That summer, when I went to Italy, I decided to interview family members and friends, asking them questions that ranged from their work schedule to their hobbies, from the Italian school system to sports. The topics of my interviews were based on those from the culture sections of *Avanti* and *Immagina*, the textbooks for beginner and intermediate Italian that we use at Dickinson. The next semester I played all the interviews in class. In my evaluations at the end of the course, several students mentioned that the interviews were among their favorite activities, because they were an opportunity to learn more about Italian culture. Since those interviews went so well, I have continued to make more interviews through the years. For example, last year I interviewed some of the exchange students from the University of Bologna who studied at Dickinson for a semester. One student was in her late twenties and was still living at home, so I asked her what the word *mammone* means and if she thought that she was a *mammona*.. Another student was from Bari but she studies in Bologna and so I asked her about her university experience [LET'S WATCH A LITTLE CLIP OF THIS INTERVIEW]. In addition to the interviews to family members and friends, I also use interviews that I find online. With beginner level courses, I especially enjoy interviews in Italian to famous foreign people, because they speak more slowly and are easier to understand. Also, I think that students enjoy seeing that there are famous people with whom they are familiar who can speak Italian. For example, I show them an interview to basketball star Kobe Bryant, who lived and studied in Italy for several years when he was a child. Or another interview that I like to show is the one that Australian dj Tamara Taylor did to Colombian pop star Shakira in 2009 on Radio Dimensione Suono [SLIDE]. I find it interesting because it is mostly in Italian but neither of them is Italian and so it shows students that Italian can be a language that brings together people of different backgrounds. Besides the typical listening-comprehension activity, it is also possible to ask the students what they thought

of the interview. For example, after watching Shakira's interview, I ask them to answer to two questions: 1. Cosa pensi di Shakira? 2. Pensi che parlare in italiano abbia aiutato Shakira con i suoi fan italiani? These two questions allow students to express their opinion and also to use the *congiuntivo*.

In conclusion, I find interviews useful for different aspects. They are great listening and comprehension activities, which allow students to get accustomed to different Italian accents. Also, the format of interviews is particularly suited to beginner and intermediate Italian students, because they consist of many short segments, which are easier to follow than a lecture. But mostly, what makes interviews so interesting to the students is that their content focuses on real Italian culture. Students don't really enjoy learning about culture solely from the textbook, because they don't find the material authentic. On the contrary, when it is a real person who tells students about themselves and the things that they do in their lives, it's a whole different story: the students are eager to learn and absorb the information at a much deeper level.

As you can see, both music and interviews are great tools to use in the classroom. They make a language class more varied and interesting and they expose students to "real" Italian culture. Using authentic material to teach culture will make the students more passionate and interested in the course; as a consequence, exposing students to authentic material on a regular basis can contribute to a student's decision to continue with Italian to learn more about Italy and its culture.